The Rational Basis of Human Ethics

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This essay addresses important questions regarding human ethics. Do we possess free will to develop and implement our ethical perspectives, or are all our thoughts and actions predetermined? Are human ethical judgments merely relative to particular cultures or historical epochs, or are there universal ethical truths? What is the basis of human ethics: religion, tradition, emotion, a categorical imperative, utilitarianism, reason? What do we mean by reason? Is human reason only instrumental, or can it also be employed to identify ethical and political objectives? What ethical considerations pertain to us as individuals? What ethical principles underlie social ethics, citizen ethics, and political ethics? The following discussion considers each of these questions.[1]

I. FREE WILL

I define free will as "the independent ability to make conscious decisions that are neither predetermined nor random."[2]

Over the millennia, there have been many arguments against free will.[3] For example, Augustine of Hippo, in his later writings, taught a doctrine of divine predestination whereby the ability to have virtue depends on God's prior grace, which is extended only to the elect few. God chooses the elect before the foundation of the world. Only the elect will go to heaven; the rest will go to hell. Martin Luther and John Calvin accepted Augustine's predestinarian doctrine and added that God predetermines everything. All these theological arguments against free will require some kind of faith in revelation. As discussed below, there are so many conflicting claims to revelation that it is impossible to ascertain which, if any, are true. Moreover, some (but not all) present-day theologians reject the earlier strict doctrine of divine predeterminism.[4]

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[1] Some portions of the present essay are extracted from Alan E. Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics* (Philosophia Publications, 2022).

[2] Alan E. Johnson, *Free Will and Human Life* (Philosophia Publications, 2021), 3. For a full explanation of the meaning of this definition, see pages 3–5 of *Free Will and Human Life*.

[3] Johnson, *Free Will and Human Life*, chap. 1 ("Arguments Against Free Will").

[4] Johnson, *Free Will and Human Life*, 7–17, 63–65.

Many writers in recent decades have claimed to demolish any notion of free will.[5] Several of them have based their determinist views, at least in part, on the neuroscientific experiments of Benjamin Libet. However, Libet himself rejected the assertions of his epigones that his research disproved free will. In his final book, he concluded that the existence of free will "is at least as good, if not a better, scientific option than is its denial by natural law determinist theory."[6]

It is less well known that serious scholars have supported free will on philosophical or scientific grounds. Space does not permit an extensive discussion here, but there is ample evidence that some kind of free will exists and that the premises of determinism are incorrect.[7]

II. RELATIVISM

Ethical relativism is "the assertion that all ends are relative to the chooser and hence equal . . . ."[8] Relativism teaches that there are no absolute ethical principles. The statement that genocide is evil is not true, because the Nazi regime practiced it and believed it to be good. The statement that slavery is wrong is not true, because that practice was endemic to a significant portion of American culture from 1617 to 1865, and many people of that epoch considered it biblically mandated. By the same logic, the statement that relativism is valid

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[5] E.g., Robert M. Sapolsky, *Determined: A Life of Science Without Free Will* (Penguin, 2023); Ted Honderich, *How Free Are You: The Determinism Problem*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002); Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, new ed. (MIT Press, 2018); Sam Harris, *Free Will* (Free Press, 2012); Gregg D. Caruso, *Free Will and Consciousness: A Determinist Account of the Illusion of Free Will* (Lexington Books, 2012.

[6] Benjamin Libet, *Mind Time: The Temporal Factor in Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 156.

[7] E.g., Johnson, *Free Will and Human Life*; Alan E. Johnson, "Critical Review of Robert M. Sapolsky, *Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will*," Academia.edu, December 16, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/111595070/Critical_Review_of_Robert_M_Sapolsky_Determined_A_Science_Of_Life_Without_Free_Will_New_York_Penguin_2023_); Peter Ulric Tse, *A Neurophilosophy of Libertarian Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2024); Peter Lugten, "The Modular-with-Feedback Theory of Free Will: Challenging Determinism, Compatibilism, and Sundry Libertarians," *Free Inquiry*, April/May 2026, 13; Bob (Robert O.) Doyle, *Free Will: The Scandal in Philosophy* (I-Phi Press, 2011); Robert Hanna, *Deep Freedom and Real Persons—A Study in Metaphysics* (Nova Science, 2018); Christian List, *Why Free Will is Real* (Harvard University Press, 2019); William R. (W. R.) Klemm, *Making a Scientific Case for Conscious Agency and Free Will* (Elsevier, Academic Press, 2016); Alfred A. Mele, *Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Jeffrey M. Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* (HarperCollins, 2002); Henry P. Stapp, *Quantum Theory and Free Will: How Mental Intentions Translate into Bodily Actions* (Springer, 2017).

[8] Leo Strauss, "Relativism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15.

cannot be true, because that notion is merely relative to the intellectual mindset from which it emanated. Relativism contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction.[9]

III. WHAT IS THE PROPER BASIS OF HUMAN ETHICS?

Religion as a Basis of Ethics

Historically, religion has often claimed a monopoly on the formulation, promulgation, and enforcement of ethics. This is especially true of those religions that base their theology and morality on an alleged revelation from a higher power.

The problem is that there are numerous competing claims to revelation and the moral rules purportedly derived therefrom. How could one determine which claim, if any, is valid? It all comes down to "faith," which usually means faith in the religion in which one was raised.[10]

The conflicting claims to revelation often lead to theocracy, religious persecutions, and religious wars.[11] On January 6, 2021, certain votaries of Christian nationalism were involved in an unprecedented domestic assault on the US Capitol, aiming to obstruct the constitutionally mandated congressional count of the 2020 electoral votes for president. Some police officers defending the Capitol building died as a result of the attack, and many others were wounded. People involved in this mass violence called for mob executions of the vice president of the United States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the majority leader of the Senate—all present that day in the Capitol building. Many fervently believed that God appointed Donald J. Trump to be president in order to institute a theocratic regime in which liberals would be executed and Trump would rule as a fascist dictator in God's name.[12] Incredibly, on the first day of his second term in office, President Trump pardoned or commuted the sentences of the January 6, 2021 insurrectionists.[13]

Many religions have some moral commandments that are consistent with reasonable ethics. However, history shows that religions have frequently contravened their own moral

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[9] See Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 1–5.

[10] Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 9–13, 161–78.

[11] Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 178–82; Alan E. Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience* (Philosophia Publications, 2015).

[12] Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It By Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy* (Broadleaf Books, 2024); Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 50–52, 121–22; Alan E. Johnson, *The Electoral College: Failures of Original Intent and Proposed Constitutional and Statutory Changes for Direct Popular Vote*, 2nd ed. (Philosophia Publications, 2021), chap. 5 ("What the 2020 Election Teaches Us about the Electoral College").

[13] Proclamation 10887—Granting Pardons and Commutation of Sentences for Certain Offenses Relating to the Events at or Near the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, signed by President Donald J. Trump on January 20, 2025, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-202500112/pdf/DCPD-202500112.pdf.

doctrines, let alone ethical considerations that derive from reason alone. Religion is a precarious foundation upon which to base an ethical perspective and way of life.

Tradition as a Basis of Ethics

Belief systems that are informed by tradition rather than revelation—for example, Confucianism—could be said to be more a philosophy than a religion.[14] Many of Confucius's reported sayings regarding ethics are wise.[15] Ethical Confucianism endured for millennia without grounding itself in any claim of divine revelation, relying instead on tradition, reason, and the exemplary wisdom of the sages. Some other traditions are not so salutary.

Emotion as a Basis of Ethics

One of the themes of modern ethical philosophy is that human reason serves a subsidiary function to what was originally called "moral sentiment," which included such mental states as feeling, emotion, instinct, impulse, affection, sympathy, and empathy. This approach is exemplified in the writings of Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), David Hume (1711–76), Adam Smith (1723–90), and Jonathan Haidt (1963–). Hutcheson was a professor at the University of Glasgow. David Hume and Adam Smith were two of his most famous students.[16]

Francis Hutcheson taught that God implanted certain feelings in the human soul, from which we acquire the first notions of good and evil. These divinely implanted feelings govern not only our ethical disposition toward ourselves but also our feelings of sympathy toward others. Human reason exists for the purpose of understanding, organizing, and devising means to satisfy those feelings. The implanted moral feelings establish the ethical ends; the main function of reason is to ascertain the best means of achieving those ends. Divine law and providence ultimately govern morality, and "both our social and our selfish affections will harmoniously recommend to us one and the same course of life and conduct."[17]

David Hume's first major work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (originally published in 1740), argued that "[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."[18] Hume presented his definitive, mature work on ethics in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*,

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[14] See, e.g., *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Simon Leys (W. W. Norton, 1997).

[15] See Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, iv, 1, 63, 75–76, 78, 85–86, 87, 92, 93, 111–12, 113.

[16] Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 13–19.

[17] Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Glasgow, 1755), 57, 58 (italics in the original); Francis Hutcheson, *Philosophiae Moralis Institutio Compendiaria with A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Luigi Turco (Liberty Fund, 2007) (originally published 1742), 1.1.

[18] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, UK, 1896), 415 (2.3.3) (originally published 1740).

published in 1751.[19] In this book, Hume emphasized the importance of a utilitarian approach to promote justice and societal happiness. He now even extolled reason, "since nothing but that faculty can instruct us in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor." But only "sentiment," not reason, provides the end, for which reason is the means. "This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery . . . ." He continued to insist that reason does not apply to moral judgments. Rather, "[t]he hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains, that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary." He concluded that "the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by reason, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependance on the intellectual faculties." Indeed, "[r]eason, being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination, by showing us the means of attaining happiness or avoiding misery."[20]

Hume's rejection of reason for the evaluation of ends cannot be correct. If ends are determined solely by "sentiment" or emotion, then one cannot distinguish the ends of tyrants, criminals, and others who have no "sentiment" that they are doing wrong from the ends of beneficent human beings. We have witnessed, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, dictators and nonstate actors who use rational means to achieve irrational and evil ends.

Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*[21] is a very long and complicated work, for which only a book-length analysis would be adequate.[22] It is sufficient for present purposes to observe that Smith continued the "moral sentiments" tradition of his professor, Francis Hutcheson, and his friend, David Hume. But Smith went beyond and, to an extent, disagreed with each of them regarding certain particulars. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* emphasized the moral sentiment of sympathy and thereby anticipated the emphasis on sympathy and empathy in twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship. But that book also reflected Smith's view of providence (the "invisible hand") and the role of self-interest in economic matters, which he elaborated further in his later work *The Wealth of Nations*.

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, is one of many twenty-first-century scholars to argue that emotions dictate our moral judgments and that reasoning about them is normally

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[19] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (Hackett, 1983).

[20] Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 82–88 (italics in the original of the quotations).

[21] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. E. G. West (Liberty Classics), 1976 (originally published 1759).

[22] For such an analysis of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*, see Joseph Cropsey, *Polity and Economy: With Further Thoughts on the Principles of Adam Smith* (St Augustine's Press, 2001).

after the fact and confabulatory. His most famous paper espousing this thesis is aptly titled "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail."[23]

Haidt loves Hume and dislikes Plato. He wholeheartedly accepts Hume's youthful dictum that "[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." He rejects Plato's contrary teaching that reason ought to supervise the passions.[24] He cites with approval the moral sentiment school of Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith.[25]

Haidt bases his conclusion that emotion is dominant in human life on numerous social science studies, many of which were conducted by him and his team. One of the dissenters from his views is Hanno Sauer, a philosophy professor, who has published an extensive and intensive critique of Haidt's studies, methods, and conclusions.[26]

From my perspective, the most important thing to understand about Haidt's work is that he analyzes how people often *do* think instead of considering how they *should* think. As Horatio said to Hamlet, "There needs no Ghost my lord, come from the / Grave to tell us this."[27] The fact that many or most people are irrational is not news. If there were ever any doubt about that "fact," the extreme irrationality of at least some portion of the populace became quite evident in the United States on January 6, 2021, when emotion prevailed over reason in a mob assault on the Capitol building, resulting in several deaths, many injuries, and substantial property damage. The question is whether we are going to sit idly by, fiddling while Rome burns, and let emotionalism ruin our individual and collective lives.

Kant's Categorical Imperative as a Basis of Ethics

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) postulated that what he called the "categorical imperative" is the fundamental law of all morality: "There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this: *act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*."[28] "For the purpose of achieving this it

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[23] Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail," *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001): 814–34, https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2F0033-295X.108.4.814. See also Jonathan Haidt, "Synthesis in Moral Psychology," *Science*, n.s., 316, no. 5827 (May 18, 2007): 998–1002, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20036276; and Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012), Kindle.

[24] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 27–29; Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail," 815–16.

[25] Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail," 815–16.

[26] Hanno Sauer, *Moral Judgments as Educated Intuitions* (MIT Press, 2017).

[27] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hinman and Peter W. M. Blayney (W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 775 (3.2).

[28] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:421, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996) (emphasis in the original). See also Kant,

is of the utmost importance to take warning that we must not let ourselves think of wanting to derive the reality of this principle from the *special property of human nature*. For, duty is to be practical unconditional necessity of action and it must therefore hold for all rational beings (to which alone an imperative can apply at all) and *only because of this* be also a law for all human wills."[29] Nonhuman "rational beings," for Kant, included rational beings on other planets, God, and, possibly, angels.[30]

Kant's categorical imperative is one way of thinking about ethics, and, indeed, it can often be helpful as a check against erroneous ethical conclusions. But I do not agree that it should be an absolute rule. Kant himself inadvertently showed its limitations when he argued that, given the categorical imperative against lying, one should not lie to a person at one's door who is intent on murdering a person hiding in one's house.[31] Unlike many armchair "thought experiments," this scenario actually occurred in Nazi Germany when individuals were hiding Jews whom the police were trying to apprehend and send to concentration camps. It is unlikely that any of the persons who answered the door, imbued with the categorical imperative, told the truth about the situation.

Kant believed that ethics or morality could be reduced to absolute rules formulated by philosophical reflection. He argued in the above-quoted passages that ethics should be based on rules designed for all rational beings (including God, angels, and rational beings on other planets)—without specific reference to human nature or experience. Yet, like other human beings, he could not know the mind of God or even the minds of angels or rational beings on other planets. His own examples were "human, all too human."

Utilitarianism as a Basis of Ethics

Different writers have different formulations of the basic principles of utilitarianism. The present discussion focuses on the views of John Stuart Mill as set forth in his essay titled "Utilitarianism."[32]

Critique of Practical Reason, 5:30, in *Practical Philosophy*; and Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:225, 376, 389, in *Practical Philosophy*.

[29] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:425 (italics in the original).

[30] Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," trans. Allen W. Wood, 8:23n (other planets), in *Anthropology, History, and Education,* ed. Günter Zöller et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:32 ("all finite beings that have reason and will and even includes the infinite being as the supreme intelligence"); Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Louden, 7:331–33 (other planets, angels), in *Anthropology, History, and Education*; Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:405 ("holy (supernatural) being"), 6:435 ("seraph").

[31] Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy," in *Practical Philosophy*.

[32] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism: With Related Remarks from Mill's Other Writings*, ed. Ben Eggleston (Hackett, 2017).

Mill wrote that "[t]he creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure."[33]

Mill had a kind of utopian dedication to the general good, defined as the greatest happiness, but his utilitarian theory is vague on how the general good is to be determined. Like Rousseau's General Will, the utilitarian doctrine raises the prospect of majority tyranny. During several centuries of American history, European settlers pushed Indigenous people off their lands, occasionally enslaved them, and sometimes tried to forcibly convert them to Christianity. This probably made the European immigrants, who eventually became the majority in America, happy in the utilitarian sense of the concept. Many other examples could be cited: American slavery before and during the Civil War, "Manifest Destiny" during the nineteenth century, racial segregation and Jim Crow laws during the twentieth century, and countless other such instances in American and world history. The utilitarian doctrine does not clearly prohibit such majoritarian happiness at the expense of minorities. Individual rights must apparently give way when they conflict with the happiness of the majority.

Reason as the Basis of Ethics

The classical Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle elaborated ethical teachings in which human reason was the ultimate architectonic principle. Plato articulated a tripartite division of the human soul, with reason in command, guiding spiritedness and desire. Note that Plato did not dream of eliminating the spirited and desiring parts of the soul. Rather, he argued that those impulses should remain under the intelligent supervision of reason.[34]

Similarly, Aristotle taught that living in accordance with reason—as distinguished from a life in which passion is dominant—is the kind of life that fulfills the unique *ergon* (work or function) of human beings and is the essential component of happiness.[35] Aristotle defined *phronēsis* (variously translated as active wisdom, prudence, practical judgment, practical intelligence, or practical wisdom) as "a true characteristic that is bound up with action, accompanied by reason, and concerned with things good and bad for a human being."[36] For Plato and Aristotle, life in accordance with reason is an end in itself; it is not a means to another end.

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[33] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, II.2.

[34] Plato, *Republic*, bk. 9; cf. *Republic* 438c–444d).

[35] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.3.1095a5–12, 1.7.1097b23–1098a18, 9.8.1168b33–1169a7.

[36] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.5.1140b5–7, in *Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics"*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (University of Chicago Press, 2011); cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 2.1.1219b25–30, 2.2.1220b3–6, 2.3.1220b26–33, 2.5.1222a6–9, 1222b3–3.

Plato and Aristotle postulated the principle of contradiction (which contemporary philosophy professors often call the principle or law of noncontradiction). Plato wrote: "It's plain that the same thing won't be willing at the same time to do or suffer opposites with respect to the same part and in relation to the same thing."[37] Similarly, Aristotle wrote: "It is not possible for the same thing at the same time both to belong and not belong to the same thing in the same respect (and as many other things as we ought to specify in addition for the sake of logical difficulties, let them have been specified in addition). And this is the most certain of all principles . . . ."[38]

Some present-day scholars question the universal applicability of the principle of contradiction.[39] It is true that this principle appears to break down at the frontiers of physics. Our understandings of quantum physics and perhaps relativity physics do not seem amenable to the principle of contradiction—not to mention the long-standing metaphysical perplexities of a first cause, the beginning of time, and the infinity of space. But it is my strong conviction that the principle of contradiction applies, and should apply, to ethical and political matters.[40] When individual persons and political leaders violate the principle of contradiction in their individual or our collective lives, the result is insanity and chaos. We see examples of this throughout history, including in our own time.

Plato proceeded in his dialogues by way of rational dialectic, ascending from the contradictions of opinion to the noncontradictory plane of knowledge. Aristotle developed a complex system of logic. Plato and Aristotle recognized the importance of both inductive and deductive reasoning,[41] though medieval Scholasticism focused on Aristotle's deductive logic. Needless to say, the problem with deductive logic is that it starts with unquestioned premises. Such a procedure was, of course, compatible with medieval theology, but the formulation and questioning of premises by way of inductive reasoning was part of the philosophical approaches of both Plato and Aristotle and is also characteristic of modern science.

Plato and Aristotle both had a secular, teleological view of human nature—that human beings could only be properly understood in light of their potential for rational and ethical thought and conduct. As we have seen, much of religion and certain dominant strains of modern philosophy have rejected this approach.

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[37] Plato, *Republic* 436b, in *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed., trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1991).

[38] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.3.1005b19–23, in *Aristotle's "Metaphysics"*, trans. Joe Sachs (Green Lion Press, 2002).

[39] E.g., Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Clarendon, 2002).

[40] For a discussion of an apparent (but not ultimately true) contradiction between ethics and politics, see Alan E. Johnson, *Reason and Human Government* (Philosophia Publications, 2026), chap. 1 and pp. 178–79.

[41] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.4.1095a30–b4, 6.3.1039b25–35.

Human ethics, understood in a teleological, secular, biological sense, has three goals, ends, purposes: (1) to identify and promote the best possible state of being for each individual human being, (2) to identify and promote the best possible relations between individual human beings and other human and nonhuman beings, and (3) to identify and promote the best possible political order for human beings.

Differences exist between reasoning about such abstract disciplines as mathematics and physics and reasoning about human decisions and actions. Mathematics and the physical sciences ask what is *true* about matters *not* involving human decisions and actions. Biology, unlike mathematics and physics, involves ends and means. Human decisions and actions involve *reasoning* about *both* ends and means. As Aristotle recognized, correct reasoning should be applied both to the determination of ends and to the formulation of means.[42]

Similarly, there is a distinction between formal and informal logic. Formal logic abstracts the forms of reasoning from their content and is today often expressed in symbolic or quasi-mathematical language. Formal logic underlies, for example, the structure of computer algorithms. Informal logic studies reasoning as it occurs in ordinary discourse and professional practice. It examines the patterns of natural-language argumentation, including fallacies and the broader domain of critical thinking. In *Reason and Human Ethics*, I discuss the principal informal fallacies and related issues: post hoc and correlation fallacies, ambiguity or equivocation, circular reasoning, ad hominem and ad populum argumentation, diversion and straw-person fallacies, false analogy, false equivalence, appeal to authority, hasty generalization, the principle of (non)contradiction, quotations out of context, statistical reasoning, confirmation bias, and valid and invalid conspiracy theories.[43]

We are familiar with reasoning about means: What is the most rational and effective way to achieve a given end? But how do we reason about ends? Plato's dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Republic* is an illustration of how to reason about ends. The question of the dialogue is, "What is justice?" Socrates's interlocutors propose, in book one of the *Republic*, various definitions of justice. Cephalus, a pious old man, suggests that justice is telling the truth and returning property with which one has been entrusted. Socrates gently refutes that position by pointing out that it would not be just for someone to tell the truth and return a weapon to an insane person. (Kant would likely disagree.) After Cephalus leaves the conversation, his son Polemarchus claims that justice means doing good to friends and harm to enemies. Socrates then shows, by way of his famous "Socratic method" of questions and answers, some of the many problems inherent in that position. Finally, Thrasymachus argues that justice is the advantage of the stronger.

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[42] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.1.1138b18–35, 6.2.1139a21–27, 6.5.1140b5–7, 6.13.1144b1–1145a11. Cf. Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*. (Clarendon, 2009), pt. 1.

[43] Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 40–62.

Socrates brilliantly explores all the ramifications of that view, including the fact that it leads, inevitably, to contradictions.

The foregoing only scratches the surface of the inquiry in the *Republic* about the meaning of justice, but it shows that correct reasoning about ends is necessary and important for human life and that feelings and conventional wisdom are inadequate foundations for identifying proper ends.[44]

Preparation for the Life of Reason

Humans are not born with reason, but—with the exception of those with a severe birth defect—are born with a capacity for reason. That capacity is developed over a long period of childhood and adolescence. To the extent that young people are not yet capable of reason, they need to be influenced by ethical habituation. That period is longer with some people than with others. Some humans can reason, more or less adequately, even during the later stages of childhood. Others—criminals, sociopaths, and so forth—may never be able to reason, ethically, about ends, though they may have some proficiency to develop "rational" means to reach their irrational ends.

Aristotle emphasized, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, the importance of proper education and habituation of the young in ethical conduct. We have learned that the prefrontal cortex is a locus of reasoning and decision-making in the human brain. However, the human prefrontal cortex does not fully develop until a person is well into their twenties or thirties. In the meantime, most young people need habitation in ethical conduct. However, there is good habituation, and there is bad habituation. Parents, teachers, and others should know the difference and promote good habituation with a view to its eventual replacement, if and when possible, by ethical reasoning.[45]

IV. APPLICATIONS OF THE RATIONAL BASIS OF HUMAN ETHICS

The remaining sections of this essay address the application of informal logic, critical thinking, and secular teleological reasoning to individual, social, and political ethics.

Individual Ethics

The touchstone for individual ethics is what facilitates our individual physical and mental well-being, provided we do not violate our ethical duties to others.

Good health is, of course, the primary desideratum for physical well-being. Accordingly, activities that facilitate good health are good; activities that are unhealthy—alcoholism, drug addiction, and so forth—should be avoided.

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[44] For an in-depth examination of Plato's *Republic*, see chapter 2 ("On Plato's Republic") of Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Rand McNally, 1964).

[45] Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 65–67. For discussions of contemporary virtue ethics and evolutionary biology, see Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 25–29.

But what constitutes *mental* well-being? That is a question that preoccupied Plato and some other philosophers throughout the millennia. Plato spoke of the right order of the soul (*psyche*): reason should guide the spirted and desiring parts of the soul. What Plato meant by "soul" is a large question. To avoid theological issues, we can consider the term "mind" to be a synonym for "soul."

The preceding sections of this essay argued that human reasoning can—and should—be about both ends (noninstrumental reason) and means (instrumental reason). But why should we wish to be rational? What's in it for us?

Every thinking person asks important questions, often at a young age: How should I live? What are the attitudes I should hold about myself? How should I act? How should I conduct my life? What are my goals regarding work and family? How should I treat others? And so forth.

Mature human beings are distinguished from other living things by a fully developed prefrontal context, which enables them to exercise reason and planning regarding both ends and means. To be human in the true sense means to commit oneself to a rational mode of life—to *think* rationally and to *apply* one's reason to the situations with which life confronts us. Such commitment to reason is not always easy. Humans are often susceptible to irrational and harmful impulses: mental laziness, thoughtless conformism, excessive materialism, intemperance, immoderate anger, megalomaniac love of power, and so on.[46]

Confucius and Aristotle discussed the concept of the ethical mean (as distinguished from the arithmetic mean). Their idea was that humans should seek an appropriate middle way between excess and deficiency with regard to such things as courage and moderation. Life as we know it in the twenty-first century presents many circumstances in which application of the ethical mean (often called the Golden Mean) is appropriate.

Individual ethics is guided by the quest for what humans can look to in order to fulfill the best possibilities of human nature. It is, in this sense, teleological.

Social Ethics

When asked "Is there any single word that could guide one's entire life," Confucius responded, "Should it not be *reciprocity*? What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others."[47] Similarly, Jesus stated: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you . . . ."[48] Other philosophies and religions also have various formulations of the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule may be a good general standard, but it has some drawbacks. Its literal application in all circumstances can lead to ethical quandaries. For example, if one killed

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[46] See Johnson, *Reason and Human Ethics*, 69–74, for a fuller discussion of these departures from reason.

[47] *Analects of Confucius*, trans. Leys, 15.24 (italics in the Leys translation).

[48] Matthew 7:12 (NRSV).

another in self-defense, how would the Golden Rule apply? Additionally, what one person wants, another may not, especially when they are from different cultures. Perhaps both people want something that is unethical. The Golden Rule may be a starting point for thinking about ethical obligations to others, but, like most rules, it does not necessarily always lead to a good end.

Nevertheless, the intent behind the Golden Rule is benign. What those who promulgated it probably meant was that one should normally treat others with respect and politeness.

It is rational to seek harmony in social relationships, especially in situations in which all people involved have good intentions and act accordingly. It is wrong, and counterproductive, to engage in prejudice, discrimination, slander, backbiting, and similar misconduct. One should strive for rational interactions in friendships, romantic relationships, family situations, work environments, and other social contexts.[49]

Citizen Ethics

Correct reasoning and critical thinking are imperative in political speech and action, especially for those who vote or express their views publicly. Ideologies promoting authoritarianism, whether of the right or left, should be rejected and, if possible, opposed.[50]

Political Ethics

We are witness, in our time and in previous epochs, to authoritarian or totalitarian political leaders who have no proper understanding or appreciation of constitutional democracy. Examples include Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler, Mao Zedong, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump. Such leaders are unethical and, in many cases, deranged. In contrast, we see some political leaders who have a more rational and ethical approach to government. But some nonauthoritarian figures who have led democratic republics have exhibited an appalling lack of rational and ethical values. We are a very long way from any semblance of Plato's conception of a philosopher-king. Whether, in this age of nuclear weapons and extreme climate change, the human world can survive is something that cannot be predicted. It will depend on the rationality and ethics of individuals and their political leaders.[51]

V. REASON AND EMOTION IN ETHICS AND POLITICS

This essay has emphasized the importance of reason, as distinguished from emotion, in ethical and political matters. But is there, nevertheless, any proper place for emotion?[52]

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[49] For more details and applications, see chapter 4 of *Reason and Human Ethics*.

[50] For more details and applications, see chapter 5 of *Reason and Human Ethics*.

[51] For more details and applications, see chapter 6 of *Reason and Human Ethics*; see also Johnson, *Reason and Human Government*.

[52] The remainder of this section is an extract from pages 176–77 of Johnson, *Reason and Human Government*.

The word "empathy" means different things to different people, and I use the term here to refer to a rational and occasionally emotional concern about the welfare of others. Empathy in this sense surely plays an important role in formulating governmental policy at all levels—from international politics to national, regional, and local government treatment of people who have not been fortunate. We see, to cite just a few examples, a total lack of empathy in the Nazi actions against Jews, the populist mistreatment of migrants, and the persecution of religious minorities throughout history.

In the final analysis, however, even empathy should be governed by reason. Empathy assists reason in formulating the proper objectives of government, but the means to achieve those ends should be rationally and ethically devised to ensure they do not result in the opposite of what was intended. As the proverb says, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Moreover, empathy should not be limited to those in one's own in-group.

Once reason, accompanied by empathy, ascertains correct political ends and means, it often needs to be fortified by yet another emotion—courage or, as Plato called it, spiritedness. One must have the courage of one's convictions and not bow to irrationality and prejudice from any quarter. Individuals should use reason to identify the times and places in which courage should be manifested in public speech or political action. That will depend on particular circumstances, many of which cannot be predicted in advance of their occurrence.

Politics, as we know it, often involves irrational anger and other emotional excesses. Such extreme behavior has no place in a reasonable and decent society. As Hamlet said to Horatio, "Give me that man, / That is not Passions Slave, and I will weare him / In my hearts Core: I [aye], in my Heart of heart, / As I do thee."[53]

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Proper reasoning about both ends and means is an essential component of human ethics and politics. So is moderation. Although empathy and courage are also important, they should be subservient to a rational appraisal of their propriety and effectiveness in particular circumstances.

The ethical reformation of humankind will likely take centuries, if not millennia, to accomplish—if, indeed, it ever occurs at all. In the meantime, government is needed for the formulation and administration of criminal and civil law, foreign and defense policy, and promotion of the common good. Humans will be successful in all these endeavors only

[53] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, p. 775 (3.2).

to the extent they adhere to an appropriate understanding of ethics, which includes a commitment to correct reasoning about both ends and means.

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